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SIPDIS

PASS TO NEA/ELA FOR JAABELL

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TAGS: PGOV PREL SY FR

SUBJECT: SYRIAN AMBASSADOR TOUTS BETTER RELATIONS WITH U.S.,
FRANCE, OTHERS

Classified By: Classified by Pol M/C Allegrone for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary. The Syrian Ambassador to France Lamia Chakkour discussed a wide variety of topics with PolMinCouns and poloffs October 13. The Ambassador praised France's rapprochement with Syria and said her country had been helpful in educating the Government of France (GOF) about regional issues and hinted at actions the USG could take to improve relations with Damascus. Chakkour said Franco-Syrian rapprochement started by concentrating on larger issues of mutual interest before the countries moved onto topics in which they had differences. She said high level exchanges and visits, as well as commercial ties, helped blaze the trail for eventual rapprochement. Chakkour discussed Syria's improving relations with its neighbors. Asked about Sarkozy's initiative to host a Mediterranean Summit to support the peace process, Chakkour was categorical -- Assad has said he will not attend unless success is guaranteed. However, she added there are times in history when peace is possible and this might be one of them, but not without U.S. involvement. End summary.

RAPPROCHEMENTS

¶2. (C) Syrian Ambassador to France Lamia Chakkour hosted PolMinCouns and poloffs on October 13 in what she described as the highest level meeting with the USG of her two-year tenure in Paris. Chakkour was very welcoming to us and she was enthusiastic about Syrian rapprochement with France and the possibility of better relations with the U.S., but she had misgivings about Israel and Iraq. Early in their rapprochement, Chakkour said, the Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) had helped France with its concerns over Lebanon and remained "discrete" during French efforts to mediate the Gaza conflict of January 2009. At the same time, she said, France shared Syria's concern for the violence of the Gaza conflict, and supported its efforts to lift the Israeli blockade and to promote Palestinian reconciliation.

¶3. (C) The rapprochement between France and Syria began with small exchanges and grew into high-level bilateral meetings and delegations, according to Chakkour, and it was aided by ongoing commercial relations between the countries, which she said never ceased during the "cold period." She added that these contacts evolved to include third countries including Iraq before the August 19 bombings in Baghdad that led to Iraqi recriminations against Syria. Chakkour said President Sarkozy helped French-Syrian relations to improve by repeatedly saying that France was Syria's friend and she hinted that the USG should do the same. She described Syrian Foreign Minister Muallim's October visit to Paris and the subsequent trip to Damascus by French Presidential Advisor Levitte and Presidential General Secretary Gueant as very successful. In addition, she said Syria's participation in the first meeting of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) -- at Sarkozy's urging -- helped cement the Syrian "dtente"

with France, demonstrated mutual understanding and trust, and assisted France in showing other European countries that they should open up to Syria. Chakkour added that dtente with France was complicated by the development, over many years of frosty relations (except in the commercial sphere), of a sizable cadre of civil servants unfavorably disposed to Syria. She feared the same was true for the USG.

¶4. (C) Chakkour said Syria would welcome USG actions that would demonstrate a desire to improve relations and welcomed President Obama's commitment to the Middle East peace process as a very helpful step. She also stressed that Syria wants to improve bilateral relations with the U.S. and expressed concern about sanctions on trade. We mentioned that an improvement in bilateral relations requires positive steps by both parties and that we too would like to see more positive Syrian action with its neighbors and toward Lebanon.

TROUBLE SPOTS

¶5. (C) Despite Syria's past participation in the UfM, she said the SARG would not attend the peace summit under the auspices of the UfM sought by France and Egypt "unless success was guaranteed." (Note: This description of the Syrian position contradicts what the GOF told us four days before. See septel). Chakkour said the key players need to be willing to negotiate, and a summit should mark the end, when agreement has been reached. Responding, we noted that Sarkozy himself had put conditions on a possible summit and that we believed the parties must first enter into serious

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discussion. She added that Syria still sees Turkey as the only useful mediator for indirect talks between Israel and Syria. She marveled at the patience of Special Envoy Mitchell to keep pursuing the peace negotiations despite numerous set backs. Chakkour said Israel was not currently serious about pursuing a Middle East peace settlement and she asked if the USG was hopeful of changing the country's stance on reviving the peace process.

¶6. (C) Regarding Iraq, Chakkour said Prime Minister Maliki's accusation of Syrian complicity in the August 19 bombing in Baghdad was very worrying to Syria. She characterized Maliki's accusations as "test balloons" intended to see how the international community would react to Iraqi attempts at blaming the Syrians for their own problems. She down-played the subject of foreign fighters crossing into Iraq from Syria ("that was a problem of the Bush era") and estimated that over one million Iraqis were living in Syria to escape conditions in Iraq. Chakkour said approximately three million people traveled back and forth between Iraq and Syria, many of whom held dual Iraqi-Syrian citizenship, but they should not be mistaken for foreign fighters.

OTHER ISSUES

¶7. (C) Responding to PolMinCouns, Chakkour said France had not/not played a role in facilitating the warming of Syrian relations with Saudi Arabia (which she referred to as "Arab reconciliation"). She listed numerous regional meetings in which SARG officials participated during 2009 where they had the chance to interact directly with their Saudi counterparts, including an Arab Summit in Kuwait in January, the Doha meeting for Gaza. She then cited the recent visit of President Assad to Saudi Arabia for the inauguration of a new university in Jeddah, and the visit of Saudi King Abdullah to Damascus.

¶8. (C) Chakkour was pleased with France's support for an Association Agreement between Syria and the European Union because the French have helped to show Europeans that Syria

is a capable partner. She denied accusations that Syria has a poor record on human rights by saying people should speak to Syrian NGOs that are familiar with the situation inside the country. Chakkour also raised the issue of USG sanctions, specifically focusing on the prohibition on sales to Syria of Airbus planes containing U.S. technology. Arguing that Syria's neighbors are exploiting the fact that it cannot compete in the aviation sector, Chakkour said our sanctions policy "needs more transparency." In closing, Chakkour gave a very positive appraisal of the impression Ambassador Rivkin has made during his first weeks in Paris.

BIO NOTES

19. (SBU) Prior to coming to Paris, Chakkour said she worked at the UN for 15 years specializing in development projects. During that time she lived in New York, Kenya, Lebanon, Jordan and Kuwait. She said her father served as Syria's Ambassador to France from 1979-1986, and as Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister from 1988 - 91. The extended Chakkour clan is multi-ethnic and includes Sunnis, Shiites and various sects of Christianity.

RIVKIN